

# Facing Immigration and Racism: The Left-Wing Parties in Italy and France from the 1980s to the Early 2000s

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## 1. Starting Point: The 1980s

In 1990, the *Italia-razzismo* Association published one of the first studies on racism in Italy, authored by sociologists Laura Balbo and Luigi Manconi. The title, *I razzismi possibili* (Possible Racisms), hinted at the thesis of the investigation; the late 1980s and early 1990s marked a crucial turning point where a new phase of immigration, primarily from Eastern Europe and Africa, began to emerge in republican Italy.<sup>1</sup> The volume referenced an “internal” racism directed towards immigrants from the southern regions seeking employment in the industrial triangle cities of the North, while “external” racism referred to contexts like South Africa or the United States. Regarding the latter, Balbo and Manconi wrote that “external racism,” meaning “the attitude of intolerance and/or discrimination towards individuals and groups belonging to other national communities,” had not yet fully established itself. No political entity had presented itself as an “entrepreneur” of a racist discourse, not even the *Lega Nord* (Northern League).<sup>2</sup> Therefore, while *acts of racism* occurred in Italy, there was not a true *racist situation*. There was no “consolidated and rationally thematized attitude attributable to a social group, a segment of the population, or an organized formation.”<sup>3</sup> A few years later, the same authors published a volume titled *I razzismi reali* (Real Racisms).

Thus, from “possible,” racism in Italy had become “real.”<sup>4</sup> What had

\* Thanks to Donato Di Sanzo for reading the text and for some useful observations and comments on the Italian case.

<sup>1</sup> Balbo L., Manconi L., *I razzismi possibili*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 1990, p. 45.

<sup>2</sup> See, on these years, Barcella P., *La lega. Una storia*, Roma, Carocci, 2022.

<sup>3</sup> Balbo L., Manconi L., *I razzismi possibili*, cit., p. 46. In an article published in the “Manifesto” on the day of the first major Italian anti-racist demonstration (October 7, 1989), Laura Balbo herself had spoken of the “easy anti-racism of Italians,” or rather of an excessively solidaristic feeling which would have slowed down the “construction of a non-racist (or at least not very racist) society”. See Balbo L., *L'anti-razzismo facile*, in “Il Manifesto,” October 7, 1989.

<sup>4</sup> In the same years, Enrico Pugliese had spoken of “differential racism,” that is, an attitude that had “as its dominant theme not biological inheritance but the irreducibility of cultural differences”. Cfr. Pugliese E., *Razzismo, antirazzismo e conoscenza*, in Pugliese E.

changed in those few years? Between the summer of 1989, when an act of racism in Italy resulted in the death of a migrant, Jerry Essan Masslo, and 1992, according to the two sociologists, Italy had “become increasingly similar to other wealthy Western countries, countries that are marked, in their social structures and processes, by racism.”<sup>5</sup> This phenomenon, starting at the end of the 1980s, seemed to be “increasingly visible and increasingly accepted and legitimized. Until recently, this was not the case.”<sup>6</sup>

In these pages, we will try to reconstruct the reactions, strategic choices, and regulatory mechanisms implemented— or hindered — by the Left-Wing Parties in Italy offering a comparative look at what was happening across the Alps, in a country with a long tradition of immigration policies, also characterized by a much larger presence of immigrants since the 1930s; from 1945 primarily as a consequence of post-war decolonization processes.

The starting point for a snapshot of the French case can be 1983, a few years before what was happening in Italy. That year, the *Marche pour l'égalité et contre le racisme* (March for Equality and Against Racism) can be considered the beginning of a new phase of reaction to the “malaise des banlieues” and the increasing difficulties faced by migrants in France. The late 1970s saw the first major urban clashes, particularly in the Lyon suburbs, in the Grappinière district of Vaulx-en-Velin and then in Minguettes in Vénissieux, which attracted significant media attention.

The tensions in the suburbs had multifactorial and interconnected causes: the feeling of social and economic marginalization of the young residents of the suburbs, children of immigrants but born in France, the very degraded housing conditions in increasingly crowded neighborhoods due to the arrival of repatriates from the Maghreb. Added to this were the increase in unemployment following the 1973 crisis and the growing presence and influence of the far-right *Front National* (National Front), which promoted an anti-immigration campaign; finally, during this period, acts of racism increased significantly, as did police violence against foreigners or young people in the suburbs.<sup>7</sup>

The *Marche pour l'égalité et contre le racisme*, also known as the *Marche des Beurs*, was promoted by the SOS Avenir Minguettes association and a

(ed), *Razzisti e solidali. L'immigrazione e le radici sociali dell'intolleranza*, Roma, Ediesse, 1993, p. 24.

<sup>5</sup> Balbo L., Manconi L., *I razzismi reali*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 1992, p. 9. Masslo's was the first murder that managed to create widespread anti-racist mobilization and protest. Even before, there had been no shortage of racially motivated killings of foreigners or episodes of racism taken to extreme consequences, such as the killing of the refugee Ahmed Ali Jama, in Rome, in 1979, or the stabbing to death of the young Italian-Somali student Giacomo Valent, in 1986, by his schoolmates. On Masslo's murder and the reactions it provokes in Italy, see Di Sanzo D., *L'assassinio di Jerry Essan Masslo: un momento di svolta per il dibattito pubblico sull'immigrazione e sul razzismo*, in “Contemporanea” n. 2, aprile-giugno 2020, pp. 302-306.

<sup>6</sup> Ivi, p. 10.

<sup>7</sup> The bibliography on the topic is very extensive. See, among others, Gastaut Y., *Français et immigrés à l'épreuve de la crise (1973-1995)*, in “Vingtième siècle. Revue d'histoire”, 2004/4, pp. 107-118; Id., *L'immigration et l'opinion en France sous la Vème République*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 2000.

Catholic priest, Christian Delorme, a member of Cimade, an association supporting migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. The organizers decided to organize a protest march after one of their members, Toumi Djaïdja, was injured by a police officer; they set out on October 15th from Marseille and other cities towards Paris. Thousands of people joined the march towards the capital, reaching 100,000 participants on December 3rd, 1983; not only *beurs* (young Arabs born in France to immigrant parents) joined the march; thousands of French people joined the march to express solidarity with the anti-racist cause, including many politicians and figures from the world of entertainment and culture.<sup>8</sup>

A highly symbolic moment, this march did not bring concrete measures but it can be considered the beginning of anti-racist initiatives in the public space, at a turning point where, for the first time since the post-war period, the arrival of new foreigners became a problem and traditional pro-immigration policies were once and for all called into question, even by left-wing parties.

For this reason, we will try to reconstruct this ambivalence regarding racism and immigration issues. If the first public anti-racist activities were organized by local associations and members of the Catholic Church, as happened in Italy and the rest of Europe,<sup>9</sup> what were the positions of the left-wing political parties, particularly the *Parti socialiste*, which would be in power for many years?

We will follow both countries from the 1980s to the 2000s, identifying common elements, specificities, and differences in the ways and choices of the Left-Wing Parties in addressing the complex problems and issues caused by migration flows, integration, and the growth of racism. Despite significant differences, it is possible to observe in the cultures and government policies of the Left in Italy and France an ambivalence between two poles: on the one hand, there is a commitment to fighting discrimination and racism, and on the other, restrictive immigration policies are promoted.

As we will see, the structuring of communication on these issues, as well as a transformation of the political culture of the Left, will have long-term consequences that continue to this day.

## *2. Italy: Between Real Racism and Contradictory Migration Policies*

In the last forty years, Italy has shifted from being characterized by strong emigration to being the primary host country for migrants arriving in Southern Europe.<sup>10</sup> In the period covered in these pages, from the late 1980s to 2001, Istat (National Institute of Statistics) census data showed

<sup>8</sup> See T. Djaïdja, *La Marche pour l'Égalité. Une histoire dans l'Histoire. Entretiens avec Adil Jazouli*, La Tour d'Aigues, éd. de l'Aub, 2013; *Dix ans de Marche des Beurs: chronique d'un mouvement avorté*, éd. Desclée de Brouwer, 1994; Hajjat A., *La marche pour l'égalité et contre le racisme*, Paris, éd. Amsterdam, 2013.

<sup>9</sup> On this, see Della Porta D., *Immigrazione e protesta*, in "Quaderni di sociologia", 21, 1999, pp. 14-44.

<sup>10</sup> For a reflection on the memory of this dual experience, see Foot J., *Razzismo e Italia. Migrazioni interne, migrazioni dall'estero, storia e memoria*, in "Contemporanea", gennaio 2010, v. 13, n. 1, pp. 143-150.

an increase from 0.6% (1991) to 2.3% ten years later, rising from 356,159 presences to 1,334,889 in 2001.<sup>11</sup> In 2021, according to Istat data, about 5 million foreign citizens resided in Italy as of January 1st, representing 8.5% of residents. At the beginning of 2022, there were just over 3.5 million non-EU citizens in Italy, 65.8% of whom had long-term residence permits.

Migration to Italy began in the 1960s, but until the late 1980s, it did not take a form that warranted political reflection and intervention.<sup>12</sup> In the late 1960s, following the economic boom, the first settlements of foreign workers in Italy began, mainly in low-income sectors and for increasingly less desirable professions (sailors in Sicily, agricultural laborers, miners, domestic workers). This flow increased in the following decade without any specific legislation, while the difficulties were partially resolved through circulars, specific interventions, and sometimes small amnesties. As a result of the economic crisis and very high unemployment rates, a total blockade of new entries for work reasons was implemented in Italy in 1982.<sup>13</sup>

One of the peculiarities of the Italian case began in the late 1970s, namely the recurring practice of irregular entries for professional reasons, in the absence of effective reception legislation capable of addressing the real needs and demands of the labor market, which was then partially followed by an amnesty that regularized those who had entered clandestinely. The turning point of 1989-1992, as previously mentioned, marked the entry of immigration and the fight against emerging racism onto the political agenda, creating a strong polarization of positions and policies implemented by various governments.

Usually, the representation of this phase that began in the late 1980s is one of radical contrast between the Center-Left, which tended to propose integration policies defending immigrants' rights, and the Center-Right, which opposed restrictive policies in the name of national identity and security. However, the picture was much more nuanced, both in terms of positions and the actors involved, who played a significant role in influencing decisions: from unions to the Catholic Church's assistance policies, to European Union constraints, to cooperation with countries of origin to manage entries and expulsions. Additionally, there was a constant scarcity of resources invested in immigration-related public policies.

The first comprehensive immigration law, the Foschi Law, named after its proponent Franco Foschi, a member of the *Democrazia cristiana* (Christian Democracy) party and a former undersecretary in previous legislatures, was passed in 1986. Foschi had also been the Minister of Labor and Social Security between 1980 and 1981 and had promoted Italy's ratification of the 1975 ILO Convention No. 143 on migrant workers. This was the last legislative measure unanimously approved by the entire Parliament, underscoring the deep radicalization of positions on the matter

<sup>11</sup> Data cited in Colucci M., *Storia dell'immigrazione straniera in Italia. Dal 1945 ai giorni nostri*, Roma, Carocci, 1918, pp. 103-105. Data from 2021-2021 was taken from the Istat website (<https://noi-italia.istat.it/>).

<sup>12</sup> For a general overview, see Colucci M., *Storia dell'immigrazione straniera in Italia*, cit.; Sanfilippo M., Corti P., *L'Italia e le migrazioni*, Roma, Laterza, 2012.

<sup>13</sup> On the first migratory fluxes see Colucci M., *Storia dell'immigrazione straniera in Italia*, cit., pp. 28-47.

by political factions. The Foschi Law established full equality of treatment and rights for foreign workers compared to Italian workers, including access to social and health services, and also authorized family reunifications. However, the mechanisms for regulating entry for work reasons were only partially implemented due to the complexity of the procedures. Notably, the accompanying amnesty affected over 100,000 immigrants.<sup>14</sup>

In the late 1980s, with the emergence for the first time of acts of racism, not isolated, but springing from a situation that could be defined as racist, according to Balbo and Manconi's analysis, a new political phase began.<sup>15</sup> In 1988-1989, the Parliament initiated an "investigative inquiry into the condition of foreigners in Italy and racism phenomena" at the initiative of some *Partito comunista italiano* (Communist Party, or PCI) parliamentarians. In the face of numerous acts of racism during that period, it asserted "the need for a thorough analysis of the general causes, embedded within society, of phenomena of intolerance and racial hatred, and of the submerged phenomena of exploitation and marginalization."<sup>16</sup>

The year 1989 can also be considered the year when an organized anti-racist movement first appeared; the episode of the killing of Masslo, a South African citizen working in Villa Literno, in the province of Caserta, created a strong mobilization to denounce violence against migrants and the growing presence of racist acts. Therefore, some nationally significant episodes and an international context — changed by the Fall of the Berlin Wall — created the conditions for demonstrations and interventions. The actors in these new mobilizations were diverse: from members of the radical Left, union officials and members, to volunteers from the Catholic world.

In this context, the demand for penal measures to punish crimes of a racist nature began; the first legislative intervention related to racism dates back to 1993, when the Mancino Law was passed to combat episodes of discrimination, racism, and xenophobia. In 1995, the National Anti-Racist Network was created, which was very active until the early 2000s, when the activities of various anti-racist associations came to a halt.<sup>17</sup>

Regarding this circumstance, it should be noted that the mobilization diminished in intensity partly because the Turco-Napolitano Law of 1998 promoted cooperation between the state and the anti-racist galaxy orga-

<sup>14</sup> On the Foschi Law see Einaudi L., *Le politiche dell'immigrazione in Italia dall'Unità a oggi*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2008, pp. 111-117; Colucci M., *Il governo dell'immigrazione straniera in Italia dalla fine degli anni settanta ai primi anni novanta*, in "Meridiana", 91, 2018, pp. 14-18.

<sup>15</sup> See Di Sanzo D., *L'immigrazione in Italia prima di Jerry Masslo: il profilo sociale dell'immigrato nella ricerca scientifica degli anni Ottanta*, in "Italia contemporanea", aprile 2023, n. 301, pp. 213-236. By Di Sanzo see also *Braccia e persone. Storia dell'immigrazione in Italia ai tempi di Jerry Masslo (1980-1990)*, Torino, Claudiana, 2020.

<sup>16</sup> Archivio Storico della Camera dei Deputati, Indagine Conoscitiva I Commissione, cit. in Di Sanzo D., *Indagine conoscitiva sulla condizione dello straniero in Italia e i fenomeni di razzismo» del 1988-1989: il Parlamento italiano alla scoperta dell'immigrazione*, in "Società e storia," n. 183, 2024, pp. 58-80.

<sup>17</sup> On this, see Colucci M., *Il movimento antirazzista in Italia e le politiche migratorie 1989-2002*, "Italia contemporanea", n. 297, 2021, pp. 124-144.



nizations for managing the integration policies provided and partially funded by the law.

Returning to the 1989-1990 period, the first political intervention was Law No. 39 of February 28, 1990, known as the Martelli Law, proposed by Claudio Martelli, the Socialist Vice-President of the Council, promulgated during the sixth government of Christian Democrat Giulio Andreotti, which also caused splits and discontent on the *Partisto socialista italiano* (Socialist Party, or PSI). In particular, this law extended the right to asylum in Italy and introduced quantitative programming of foreign worker flows through annual decrees, to create a legal entry channel.

Reflecting the changed climate of the Country and the positions of the *Lega Nord*, which had shifted from “anti-South” hatred to targeting immigrants, was the fierce parliamentary debate that led to the introduction of control and expulsion measures for those entering Italy illegally. It should also be noted that the frictions were not only with the opposition but with some members of the majority too; even the secretary of the PSI, Bettino Craxi, had expressed reservations.<sup>18</sup> It should also be remembered that the main detractors of the Martelli Law were Giorgio La Malfa and other deputies of the Republican Party, more than the League or the Italian Social Movement. To support reception policies, the Immigration Policy Fund and reception centers were created; the legislative measure was accompanied by an amnesty.<sup>19</sup>

Starting in 1991, the sentiment towards foreigners worsened due to the landings of Albanians who left their country after the fall of the communist government of Enver Hoxha. On August 8th, 1991, the Vlora ship docked in Bari with more than 20,000 migrants. This became the symbolic event around which a new communication about foreigners in Italy, seen as *invaders*, was structured, fostering a sense of insecurity and hostility among the Italian population.<sup>20</sup>

At this turning point, besides immigration, Italy seemed to “discover” racism. A new representation of the immigrant began, now conveyed by the media as an invader and socially dangerous element, who challenged the safety of Italians. Studies from those years, starting with Paola Tabet’s investigation into children’s imaginations, clearly show how the depiction of the migrant concentrated every symbolic element of negative otherness, described as inferior, savage, dangerous, and harmful to Italy.<sup>21</sup>

In the 1990s, the debate on immigration was animated mainly by the *Lega Nord* (Northern League), which loudly demanded new measures to better define expulsion procedures. The decree-law No. 489 of November 18th, 1995, presented by Prime Minister Lamberto Dini during a Technical Government after the fall of the first executive led by Silvio Berlusconi,

<sup>18</sup> Caporale A., *Immigrati. Craxi ci ripensa*, in “la Repubblica”, 17 febbraio 1990.

<sup>19</sup> Piro V., *Politiche migratorie e disfunzioni funzionali. Il caso della legge Martelli*, in “Meridiana,” n. 97, 2020, pp. 245-260. Martelli returned to the law, recently, in <https://www.glistatigenerali.com/partiti-politici/immigrazione-populismi-quel-che-resta-di-craxi-intervista-a-claudio-martelli/>.

<sup>20</sup> De Cesaris V., *Il grande sbarco. L'Italia e la scoperta dell'immigrazione*, Milano, Guerini, 2018; Mai N., *The Albanian Diaspora-in-the-Making: Media, Migration and Social Exclusion*, in “Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, v. 31”, n. 3, 2005, pp. 543-561.

<sup>21</sup> Tabet P., *La pelle giusta*, Torino, Einaudi, 1997.

introduced measures on this aspect, but also measures, strongly desired by Center-Left parties, to promote integration. Following clashes between the Center-Left and the League, the decree was not converted into law.

It can therefore be observed that, as in France, the political agenda on migrants and foreigners in Italy was dictated by a right-wing and xenophobic formation like the *Lega Nord*; the presence of the main Center-Left party in its various articulations and transformations (from 1991 the Democratic Party of the Left - PDS; Democrats of the Left - 1998-2007 - from 2007 the Democratic Party), in political or technical governments, during the Berlusconi years, chased political opponents on security issues and the lack or not of migrant integration.

The law known as the Turco-Napolitano Law, passed on March 6th, 1998, named after its proponents Livia Turco, Minister for Social Solidarity, and Giorgio Napolitano, Minister of the Interior, during the first Government of Romano Prodi (Center-Left Olive Tree coalition). The law too moved between these two poles. Numerous new measures were introduced, expanding the number of new entries of foreign workers or other measures concerning the possibility of accessing the country for job search, issuing residence cards to stabilize residents, and simplified access to health services even for those not regularized. However, it should be noted that the law strengthened control and expulsion policies, deemed complementary to immigration policies. The most significant novelty and consequences were the creation of Temporary Stay and Assistance Centers (CPT), to identify and detain clandestine immigrants.<sup>22</sup>

From this moment on, in the last 20-25 years, almost all regulatory interventions were promoted by Center-Right governments. Consequently, the intervention measures mainly concerned containment and repressive measures, in the face of a growing demand for labor and, in general, a strong acceleration of immigration. A further polarization entered the political debate on an issue that had by then made it in the political agenda of the two factions.

Another element to highlight is that in Italy, the alternation in government of opposing coalitions prompted interventions to review or revoke immigration policies after each election, only partially fully implemented due to community constraints on the matter. From the mid-1980s, from the Foschi Law, to the "security package" by Maroni, named after the then *Lega Nord* Interior Minister, in 2008-2009, immigration-related regulations were at the center of about a dozen legislative interventions, sometimes one repudiating or canceling the previous one.

An example was the introduction in 2002, during Berlusconi's second government, of Law No. 189 of July 30th, 2002, known as the Bossi-Fini Law, named after the first signatories Gianfranco Fini, Deputy Prime Minister and leader of the post-fascist National Alliance, and Umberto Bossi, Minister for Institutional Reforms, founder, and long-time secretary of the Northern League. The law aimed to significantly reduce the duration of residence permits and introduced control and repressive measures, as well as increased the duration of stay in CPTs. Paradoxically, the law was ac-

<sup>22</sup> Cfr. Paoli S., *La legge Turco Napolitano: un lasciapassare per l'Europa*, in "Meridiana", 2018, n. 91, pp. 121-149.

companyed by an amnesty that involved about 650,000 people, one of the largest ever carried out in Europe.<sup>23</sup>

The law was preceded by a campaign promoted by the parties of the *Polo della Libertà* (Freedom Pole), calling for greater security, against crime and illegal immigration; this campaign also reflected the Islamophobic climate following September 11th, 2001, which weighed on the debate on the Bossi-Fini Law. As the sociologist Donatella Della Porta noted at the time, “against non-EU citizens, a series of protest actions have coalesced, more or less structured by political entrepreneurs. At the same time, however, the presence of immigrants has led to mobilizations for extending citizenship rights to all residents, regardless of their nationality.”<sup>24</sup>

In the last two decades, the presence of people of foreign origin in Italy has increased significantly, due to the needs of an economy increasingly relying on non-Italian labor; according to Istat data, in 2018, there were 5,068,000 foreigners, to which the number of those who acquired Italian citizenship must be added.<sup>25</sup>

Nonetheless, the “emergency” approach to migration flows and related aspects of reception and integration has not abated; in this regard, the Left-Wing Parties often seems to respond to security and containment demands from the Right and Far-Right, too weak to propose an overall vision of the phenomenon even today.

### 3. France: From the Invention of Anti-Racism to the “Immigration Zéro” Policy

The 1980s in France were marked by a crisis and ideological shift of the Left, coinciding with François Mitterrand’s double term as President of the Republic (1981-1995) and governments led by a socialist majority, alongside the French Communist Party (PCF) and the Radical Left Party. The “Mitterrand years” began with a series of measures in favor of workers and the working class, including wage, pension, and minimum wage increases. However, to respond to the crisis and growing unemployment, a shift in economic policy towards public spending rigor and business support was undertaken shortly thereafter.<sup>26</sup>

In this context, a change in the political cultures of the Left concerning racism and immigration can be observed. Despite the political program’s commitment to a series of measures in favor of immigrants, such as the right to vote for foreign residents in local elections, many of these measures went unfulfilled, and indeed the number of expulsions of undocumented immigrants, a relatively marginal phenomenon until the 1970s, increased starting from this period. Conversely, in the context of unemployment and

<sup>23</sup> Colucci M., *Il governo dell’immigrazione straniera in Italia dalla fine degli anni settanta ai primi anni novanta* cit., pp. 21-25.

<sup>24</sup> See Della Porta D., *Immigrazione e protesta*, in “Quaderni di sociologia”, 21, 1999, pp. 14-44.

<sup>25</sup> Data cited in Colucci M., *Storia dell’immigrazione straniera in Italia*, cit., p. 205.

<sup>26</sup> Cfr., fra gli altri Maclean M. (ed.), *The Mitterrand Years: Legacy and Evaluation*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 1998; Bernard M., *Les années Mitterrand. Du changement socialiste au tournant libéral*, Paris, Belin, 2017.



crisis, racism and xenophobia found space and legitimacy in the public sphere.<sup>27</sup>

Since the interwar period, France had been a country of reception for migrant labor flows or political refugees.<sup>28</sup> The situation remained as such until the early 1970s; however, it was a highly articulated phenomenon within itself because many foreigners arrived but considered France a “transit” territory, as returning to their country of origin was frequent for migrant workers. Over time, a growing number of migrants chose to stay, form families, and settle down.

According to Insee (National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies) data, in 2022, there were 7 million immigrants in the country, representing 10.3% of the total population; of these, 35% had acquired French nationality. The number of foreign residents in France was 5.3 million, representing 7.8% of the population; of these, 4.5 million were born abroad. The evolution of their presence was not regular in the post-war period; if until 1975 the number of foreigners increased, reaching 3,887,000, or 7.4% of the population, it then stabilized until the late 1990s due to the economic crisis and the decrease in immigration for work reasons. From the early 2000s, the number of immigrants increased again: in 2006, their presence was 5,136,000 (8.1% of the total population), with a constant increase until today.<sup>29</sup>

In the 1970s, in conjunction with the economic crisis that hit the Western world, France gradually closed its borders; foreign labor was indicated as one of the reasons for the rise in unemployment: to paraphrase “Le Monde” on October 7th, 1977, four million immigrants became four million “intruders.”<sup>30</sup>

In the 1980s, the immigration debate found ample space and strong attention in the French public sphere; the presence of foreigners became a problem to discuss and take a position on; it was also an electoral issue, especially at the initiative of the *Front National* (National Front) which, still on the fringes of national political life, began to assert itself locally. In 1983, the municipal elections in Dreux, in the Eure-et-Loir department, saw the victory of the *Front National* candidate, Jean-Pierre Stirbois, following an openly anti-immigrant electoral campaign. A few years later, in 1986, Jean-Marie Le Pen’s movement entered parliament with thirty-five deputies.

Two changes can be observed in this phase: on the one hand, the *Front National*’s political agenda, centered on immigration, began to gain recognition and legitimacy. The well-known comment by Socialist Prime Minister Laurent Fabius in April 1985 during a debate on the proportional

<sup>27</sup> See Hochet A., *L’immigration dans le débat public français de 1981 à 1988*, in “Pouvoirs”, n. 47, November 1988, pp. 23-30.

<sup>28</sup> Weill P., *La France et ses étrangers. L’Aventure d’une politique de l’immigration de 1938 à nos jours*, Paris, Gallimard, 2005 (1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1991); Noiriel G., *Le Creuset français. Histoire de l’immigration (XIXe-XXe siècle)*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1992.

<sup>29</sup> Data taken from Insee website (<https://www.insee.fr/>).

<sup>30</sup> Cited in Gastaut Y., *Français et immigrés à l’épreuve de la crise (1973-1995)*, in “Vingtième siècle. Revue d’histoire,” 2004/4, p. 108.

electoral system is noteworthy: "the Far Right offers false answers to real questions," among which he mentioned the matter of safety.<sup>31</sup>

The second change is found in the *Parti socialiste's* (Socialist Party) and generally the Left's shift in perspective on immigration. It is a path not without shadows and ambivalences, leading to disaffection from immigrants and the second generation of migrants towards the left-wing parties. A path that lasted over a decade, from the first positions adopted, already in 1972, in the Programme commun de gouvernement, shared by the PS and the PCF, which foresaw the recognition of equal rights between French and foreign workers.

In the face of rising unemployment in the late 1970s, however, the PCF began to orient itself differently, now arguing that foreign workers represented competition for French workers and posed a threat to acquired social rights. Clashes began to occur in working-class neighborhoods, or *cités*, governed by communist local administrations, inhabited mainly by poor or foreign workers. To limit ourselves to a single example, on Christmas Eve 1980, the mayor of Vitry-sur-Seine, Paul Mercieca, had evacuated a residence where 300 migrants from Mali had been accommodated; the *affair* of Vitry-sur-Seine, which saw the intervention of various associations accusing local politicians of racism, had revived "the debate on the distribution of immigrant families."<sup>32</sup>

The *Parti socialiste* traditionally aimed to advance and promote social justice for the foreign-origin population residing in France. Mitterrand was elected president with the support of the suburbs and working-class neighborhoods. It should certainly be emphasized that the first measures taken during the early years of the seven-year term went in that direction: the abolition of the death penalty, regularization of 130,000 *sans-papier* immigrants, facilitation of family reunifications, and exclusion of certain categories of people from expulsion.

Nonetheless, this path soon came to a halt: the right to vote for foreigners in municipal elections did not reach approval, a comprehensive policy for working-class neighborhoods was not realized, and expulsions resumed significantly just two years after the start of the presidential term.

It was mainly in the labor sector that the first fracture between left-wing environments and cultures and immigrant workers occurred. The wave of strikes in the early 1980s saw significant participation from this group, provoking racist reactions. During the strikes at the Talbot car factory in Poissy, the cries "Arabs to the furnace, Blacks to the Seine" directed at immigrant workers were common, as were clashes between groups of workers. For the first time, Interior Minister Gaston Defferre and Prime Minister Pierre Mauroy denounced "holy strikes, by fundamentalists, Muslims, Shiites," as well as the presence of immigrant workers "agitated by religious and political groups." For the first time, references were made to workers highlighting their religious affiliation in union and

<sup>31</sup> In the extended bibliography on the Front National see Igounet V., *Le Front National de 1972 à nos jours: le parti, les hommes, les idées*, Éditions du Seuil, 2014; Camus J. Y., *Le Front National. Histoire et analyses*, Olivier Laurens, 1997; Mayer N., Perrineau P. (dir.), *Le Front National à découvert*, Paris, Presses de la Fnsp, 1996.

<sup>32</sup> Benoît J., *L'affaire de Vitry-sur-Seine relance le débat sur la répartition des familles immigrées*, in "Le Monde", December 30, 1980.

left-wing environments. “Crisis racism,” as defined by scholar Yvan Gastaut, did not originate with the economic crisis, but it was expressed freely in this context and did not disappear with the end of the period of economic difficulties.<sup>33</sup>

The early 1980s were marked by many racist crimes and attacks, particularly against Arabs. Mobilizations against these violences were at the origin of the *Marche*, starting with the case of Minguettes, near Lyon. The unifying slogan of the various factions for mobilization was “For Equality and Against Racism.” For the first time, the *enfants issus de l’immigration* entered the public sphere and became the subject of media and political discourse, creating strong hope for change and broad public support for anti-racist demands.<sup>34</sup>

President Mitterrand, who received a delegation of the *Marche* organizers at the Élysée on December, 1983, committed to several points: creating a ten-year residence permit, already planned and not applicable to the marchers because they were mostly French nationals; and two other promises that were not fulfilled. The president had predicted a bill punishing racist crimes more severely and reopening the discussion on the right to vote for foreigners. Both projects fell through.

Another element worth highlighting is that the 1983 march did not manage to structure itself into a social and political movement to become an interlocutor of the left-wing parties. The “Convergence 84” movement, which brought together a youth collective from the Paris region, began to spread the slogan and stickers: “Touche pas à mon pote” (Don’t Touch My Buddy). Mitterrand himself had emphasized the usefulness of a youth movement around anti-racist themes for his re-election.

*SOS Racisme* was founded in October 1984, with the aim of combating racism, anti-Semitism, and other forms of discrimination, adopting the slogan “Touche pas à mon pote.”<sup>35</sup> It was created by circles close to the Socialist Party specifically to counter the growth of the far-right and the racist crimes attributed to its militants. The association received unprecedented political, financial, and media support, as evidenced by public subsidies and private sponsorships for major concerts, or the broadcast of events on public channels, attended by numerous famous artists and other prominent public figures.

Soon, *SOS Racisme* attracted criticism from various quarters: from other associations, which felt sidelined from the anti-racist mobilization, denouncing the progressive exclusion of young residents of the *cités*. Others criticized *SOS Racisme*’s lack of more strictly political engagement: according to these commentators, the association considered anti-racism primarily as a moral duty, moving from the intention to counter prejudices and reprehensible — but predominantly individual — opinions, neglect-

<sup>33</sup> Gastaut Y., *Français et immigrés à l’épreuve de la crise (1973-1995)*, cit., p. 111.

<sup>34</sup> Juhem P., *SOS-Racisme, histoire d’une mobilisation «apolitique»: contribution à une analyse des transformations des représentations politiques après 1981*, Doctoral thesis in sociology, dir. B. Lacroix, December 1998; Marmoz R., *SOS Racisme, un mouvement collectif et des trajectoires individuelles*, Paris, éd. L’Harmattan, 2020. On the origins of the movement see, among others, Malik S., *Histoire secrète de SOS Racisme*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1990.

<sup>35</sup> Juhem P., *SOS-Racisme, histoire d’une mobilisation «apolitique»*, cit., p. 12 e ss.

ing the aspects of power and social dominance inherent in racist ideology.<sup>36</sup> It was also not uncommon for some of *SOS Racisme*'s leadership cadres to leave the association to pursue political careers within the *Parti socialiste*.

Despite this, one of the association's characteristic activities was testing, using different profiles — when looking for housing, jobs, etc. — to concretely demonstrate actual discrimination based on racial biases, proving very useful for showing them concretely.<sup>37</sup>

By the time of Mitterrand's re-election for a second term as President of the Republic in 1988, the Left's electoral support in working-class neighborhoods had already diminished. By the late 1980s, the anti-racist movement appeared divided and fragmented, while the young people of the suburbs and *cités*, increasingly marginalized and excluded, began to turn to urban violence, also attracted by the call of Islam.<sup>38</sup> The virulent debate on the veil in 1989 opened a new phase and a new fracture in French society.

In October of that year, the *affair* of the veil began. In Creil, a northern suburb of Paris, three students at the Gabriel-Havez *collège* were excluded from school until they removed the headscarf covering their hair. Until then, there had been no legal ban on wearing a hijab in class. These were three young girls who had arrived in France for family reunification from Morocco.<sup>39</sup>

From a local case, it became a national issue when *SOS Racisme* took a position in favor of the young students, provoking strong reactions from some supporters and sympathizers of the movement, particularly figures like Gisèle Halimi or Elisabeth Badinter; beyond the positions of some intellectuals, the feminist movement showed a deep rift, splitting up and dividing internally.<sup>40</sup>

Lionel Jospin, then Minister of *Éducation nationale*, publicly stated that secularism must be respected in schools, where signs of religious affiliation should not be admitted. At the end of November 1989, a Conseil d'État ruling established that wearing a veil was not incompatible with secularism. Therefore, a heated debate ensued in the following months around these "visible signs" of religious affiliation, focusing on secularism and the presence or not of Islam in schools. By the late 1980s, public discourse on immigration crystallized around issues of integration and the role of religion; from this period onwards, xenophobic attacks mainly targeted the role of "Islam in France." The anti-racist front also took dif-

<sup>36</sup> According to Robert Gibb (*Constructions et mutations de l'antiracisme en France*, in "Journal des anthropologues", nn. 94-95, 2003, pp. 165-179) it is an approach that risks neglecting the role of institutions and the State, presenting a paternalistic discourse also towards the victims of racism, without taking their agency into proper consideration.

<sup>37</sup> On this, see Fassin D., *L'invention française de la discrimination*, in "Revue française de science politique", vol. 52, n. 4, 2002, pp. 403-423.

<sup>38</sup> Taharount K., «On est chez nous». *Histoire des tentatives d'organisation politique de l'immigration et des quartiers populaires (1981-1988)*, Solnitsata, 2017.

<sup>39</sup> Gaspard F., Khsrokhavar F., *Le foulard et la République*, Paris, La Découverte, 1995; Ferhat I. (dir.), *Les foulards de la discorde: retours sur l'affaire de Creil*, 1989, La Tour-d'Aigues-Paris, Éditions de l'Aube-Fondation Jaurès, 2019.

<sup>40</sup> Cfr., among the others, Gaspard F., *Le foulard de la dispute*, in "Cahiers du Genre", n. 3, 2006, pp. 75-93.

ferent positions: some interpreted this episode as an attack on secularism, others considered that no repressive decisions should be taken.<sup>41</sup>

The first political response came in 1994 with a circular from the Minister of Éducation nationale, François Bayrou, regulating on a case-by-case basis the authorization to wear religious signs in school, distinguishing between “discreet signs” allowed and ostentatious signs, that, on the contrary were excluded. However, this solution failed to resolve the issue; from 1994 to 2003, about a hundred students were expelled from *collèges* or *lycées* for wearing the veil; in half of the cases, the decision was later overturned by the courts.<sup>42</sup>

In 2003, President Jacques Chirac decided to form a group of “reflection” on the application of the principle of secularism in the Republic; the commission was chaired by Bernard Stasi and consisted of about twenty members, including scholars and experts such as Régis Debray, Gilles Kepel, René Raymond, Alain Touraine, and Patrick Weil. Following their recommendations, Chirac promoted a bill banning religious signs in schools; this law was passed by the Assemblée nationale in March 2004 and came into effect in French schools. Thus, the prohibition of wearing any visible religious signs, whether the Islamic veil, the kippah, or large crosses, was established, while discreet symbols of faith were allowed. This decision was later confirmed in 2013 by the Charte de la laïcité à l’école, promoted by then Éducation nationale Minister Vincent Peillon, a member of the Socialist Party under President François Hollande.

From the outlined picture, it is clear that in France, as in Italy, there is an ambivalence between often ineffective anti-racist efforts and immigration policies increasingly marked by security concerns and the fear of “invasion” by the other, mainly embodied by Islam. Here too, the Left-Wing Parties seems unable to escape a public debate centered on the themes dictated by the agenda of right-wing parties. In the name of preserving national identity, what is lacking is a deep reflection on how a contemporary society can respond to migrations, a transnational phenomenon that cannot be halted but should be addressed with adequate and appropriate political ideas and practices.

<sup>41</sup> As an example see the special issue *Laïcité-Diversité. Par delà les foulards* of “Hommes & migrations”, nn. 1129-1130, January-February 1990.

<sup>42</sup> Panero A., *L'affaire du voile islamique de Creil: logiques d'une controverse qui n'en finit pas*, in “Revue interdisciplinaire d'études juridiques”, 1/2022, pp. 29-56.